
What is the Non-Academic Student Experience and Why is it Important?

ROSHANI S. DE SILVA AND CARA GARNAUT

University of South Australia

Submitted to the *Journal of Institutional Research* January 27, 2011, accepted for publication March 15, 2011.

Abstract

The student experience is a widely used term; however, what makes up its critical components is not well understood. The focus on ‘students’ is a key feature of the government’s demand-driven system and its proposed *myUniversity* website. Understanding all aspects of the student experience will be critical to attracting and retaining students.

This article conceptually divides the student experience into the academic and non-academic experience. The focus of this article is the latter. Based on a review of the literature a definition of the non-academic student experience is provided. Survey comments from University of South Australia students, including their study abroad experiences, are analysed as an example of how the non-academic experience can influence students’ personal development and their ability to foster connections and relationships with others. It shows that developing and fostering the non-academic experience can be an integral and indeed a highlight of the overall student experience.

Keywords: Student experience, non-academic, CEQuery

The Review of Australian Higher Education (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008) highlighted the importance of the higher education sector to the Australian economy and warned that Australia was falling behind other countries in terms of performance and investment in higher education. As a percentage of Gross Domestic Product (GDP), Australia’s investment in tertiary education has remained static for a number of years (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2009), and countries are beginning to set very high targets for the proportion of their populations aged 25–34 with at least a bachelor-level qualification. Without a significant increase in the level of investment and greater bachelor attainment among the 25–34-year age group, Australia risks falling even further behind other countries.

This paper was first presented at the Annual Conference of the Australasian Association for Institutional Research, *Has institutional research come of age in Australia?* in Geelong, 10–12 November 2010.

Correspondence to: Roshani de Silva, Evaluation Analyst, Planning and Institutional Performance, City West Campus University of South Australia, 160 Currie St, Adelaide. E-mail: Roshani.DeSilva@unisa.edu.au or Cara Garnaut, Strategy and Planning Analyst, Planning and Institutional Performance, University of South Australia, Adelaide. E-mail: cara.garnaut@unisa.edu.au

In response to a recommendation by the review, the government has set a target that by 2025, 40% of 25 to 34-year-olds will hold at least a bachelor-level qualification (Gillard, 2009). In order to achieve this target, universities have set out to widen university participation and so increase access to university to underrepresented groups. These students may need support in order to complete their studies. The student experience, both inside and outside the classroom environment, will become important. The focus of this article is the non-academic experience: what it is and why it is important.

The first section of the article considers the student body and some of the challenges currently facing higher education. This is followed by a discussion of the student experience with a particular focus on what constitutes the non-academic experience. Analysis of comments from students relating to their non-academic experience follows, in order to highlight the value-added aspect of the non-academic experience.

Section 1: Background

Students entering universities today are an extremely diverse group with different cultural backgrounds and with varying ages and life experiences. Some groups of students continue to be underrepresented in higher education and their access, participation and retention rates have remained static over time.

The Review of Higher Education (Bradley et al., 2008) made a recommendation to set a target for bachelor-level attainment by the 25 to 34-year age group in Australia. In response, the government set a target that by 2025, 40% of Australians aged 25–34 will hold at least a bachelor-level qualification (Gillard, 2009). The review drew attention to the fact that in order to achieve this target, it would be necessary to increase participation of citizens from underrepresented groups including low socioeconomic status (SES) and Indigenous/Torres Strait Islander backgrounds. Tied to the need to increase participation from these groups is a vision that all those who are capable of participating in higher education should be supported to do so (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 6).

Greater attainment of bachelor-level degrees among the 25–34-year-old age group will result in economic benefits for the Australian economy that will come from greater participation in society. In the Review of Higher Education, Bradley et al. outlined a vision for Australian higher education in 2020, part of which highlighted that the system would produce ‘graduates with the knowledge, skills and understandings for full participation in society as it anticipates and meets the needs of the Australian and international labour markets’ (Bradley et al., 2008, p. 6). Universities therefore have an important role to play in building and developing Australia’s social capital. The role of universities in equipping students to enter the labour market with a strong set of graduate qualities that will allow them to participate to their full potential is considered important by employers and by students themselves (Graduate Careers Australia, 2008; Walker, 2009). This will become more important as Australia builds its knowledge economy.

To facilitate an increase in the attainment level of the 25–34-year-old population, the government is gradually lifting the caps on enrolments, which will be completely removed by 2012, paving the way for a deregulated market where universities will be able to provide places on the basis of student demand. While improving access to higher education in order to widen participation is a clear priority for universities, focus must also be placed on students’ achievement once at university. As Devlin (2010, p. 29) highlights, ‘having given them access, universities have a part to play in articulating this role and assisting students to

understand, adjust to, practice and master it'. The student experience therefore becomes extremely important. Facilities and support services will have to be adequate to meet the needs of greater numbers of students, and focus will need to be placed on the overall student experience to ensure that this is adequate for students, despite greater numbers and potentially greater diversity among the student population.

In this new environment, a renewed focus on quality assurance and standards will be the focus of the Tertiary Education Quality Standards Agency (TEQSA) and the *myUniversity* website will make data and information about universities publically available to help inform students about their choice of university. It is therefore important for universities to provide students with a positive student experience encompassing both academic as well as non-academic aspects. What follows is a discussion of what constitutes the student experience.

Section 2: What is the Student Experience?

The student experience can be broadly conceptualised in two parts: the academic experience and the non-academic experience. This article focuses on the non-academic experience that can contribute to students' personal development and social connectedness.

A review of the literature highlights conceptual aspects of the non-academic experience. Foubert and Grainger (2006) found that students who are involved in clubs and organisations have a higher level of independence than students who do not.

Wilcox, Winn, and Fyvie-Gauld (2005) noted that while a student's decision to leave university is multifaceted, social support networks play a major role in students choosing between leaving and continuing their studies. Their study therefore underlines the importance of providing students with ample opportunities to connect with other students and engage socially. In this regard, the design of student residential halls and campus meeting places can be of high importance. Gloria, Castellanos, Lopez and Rosales (2005) found social support (e.g. students' need for support) to be strongly linked to student nonpersistence, followed secondly by the impact of university comfort (e.g. class sizes and university environment).

Horstmanshof and Zimitat (2007) found student engagement was linked to positive educational outcomes. Overall, the study found orientation to be an important predictor of student engagement. A similar finding is discussed by Moeck (2005, as cited in Moeck, Hardy, & Katsinas, 2007) where rural colleges chose to provide on-campus housing to help students engage in campus activities and thereby improve student satisfaction and consequent student retention rates.

Rosenthal, Russel and Thompson (2007) investigated connectedness and social support for international students in Melbourne. Their definition of social connectedness included international students' interactions with locals, as well as club involvement. Results showed that while students felt connected, they preferred interaction at a more personal level. A study by Asmar (2005) suggests that universities should embrace the different cultures and worldviews brought in through international students to provide a more enriching atmosphere.

Another impact on the student experience is the growing popularity of social media such as Facebook[®], Twitter[®] and MySpace[™]. Madge, Meek, Wellens and Hooley (2009), acknowledge that very little is known about how such media impacts on the student

experience and how it influences students' social integration into university life. The authors recommend that universities be cautious when moving into a social networking space that students consider 'theirs' for social, not academic purposes (i.e. formal teaching). They found that Facebook® was important for students in their transition to university as students used it to connect with new people they met.

The findings made by the studies listed above are further strengthened by the matrix for content criteria as discussed by Zepke and Leach (2005). This matrix identifies ways in which the institution can help fulfil the academic and social needs of students. In particular, social networks and the absence of discrimination help support students' social and emotional needs. Orientation and fairness help support the social and emotional needs as well as the academic needs of students.

There are a number of challenges to understanding the student experience. As suggested by Benckendorff, Ruhanen and Scott (2009), many academics base their understandings on their own experiences. However, times have changed and the student experience that existed 20 years ago is very different now given the pressures the current generation of students has on their time as they balance work, study and social commitments.

Another challenge in conceptualising the student experience is that its definition will vary from institution to institution and between different student cohorts. In addition, the definition is likely to vary between academic and professional staff and between students and staff (Benckendorff et al., 2009). Thus, what fits for one institution will be different to another.

For the purpose of this article, the non-academic experience is conceptualised as the aspects of the student experience that are not directly related to students' learning.

Section 3: Analysis

Comments for both studies in this section were extracted using CEQuery, a tool used to analyse qualitative student comments according to best aspects and needs improvement (CEQuery qualitative analysis for the Australian tertiary sector). Permission was not given to provide actual student comments in this article.

Study 1: Student Comments About the Non-Academic Experience From Australasian Survey of Student Engagement [AUSSE] and the Course Experience Questionnaires [CEQ]

Background

This section revisits an investigation conducted by the University of South Australia to identify important aspects of the non-academic experience based on undergraduate students' comments in the 2008 and 2009 Australasian Survey of Student Engagement (AUSSE) and undergraduate and postgraduate comments in the 2004 to 2009 Course Experience Questionnaires (CEQ).

The AUSSE gathers data on what students do at their institutions and identifies factors that help student development. For example, among others, students are asked about the university's supportive learning environment, interaction with teaching staff and also career readiness (Australian Council for Educational Research, 2009). The CEQ is part of the

national Australian Graduate Survey (AGS), which gathers information on course experiences as well as employment outcomes (Graduate Careers Australia, 2010).

The analysis helps identify aspects of the students' non-academic experience both in terms of what students consider as being important to them and also to what degree these aspects have been fulfilled by the university.

Method

The investigation focused on student responses to the following questions:

AUSSE:

- What are the best aspects of how your university engages students in learning?
- What could be done to improve how your university engages students?

CEQ:

- What are the best aspects of your program?
- What aspects of your program were most in need of improvement?

The 2008 and 2009 AUSSE contained 2,778 comments on 'best aspects' and 2,624 comments on 'needs improvement'. There were 3,624 respondents. The CEQ for 2004–2008 contained 15,969 'best aspect' comments and 14,635 'needs improvement' comments. There were 22,046 respondents. These comments were evaluated using CEQuery (Scott, 2006) under the 12 subcategories listed below:

- asso–clubs and associations
- spor–sports
- comn–communication
- socl–social
- orie–orientation
- comm–community
- faci–facilities
- netw–networking
- conf–confidence
- atmo–atmosphere
- exch–exchange programs
- div–diversity

The number of categorical comments extracted under best aspects (BA) and needs improvement (NI) were then converted into BA/NI ratios for each survey instrument. The ratios for each survey category were then combined to obtain an overall average ratio. For example, the subcategory 'social' had 20 BA, 72 NI in AUSSE 2008; 13 BA, 49 NI in AUSSE 2009; and 150 BA, 117 NI in CEQ 2004–2009. Therefore, the BA/NI ratios are 0.28, 0.27 and 1.28 for the AUSSE 2008, AUSSE 2009 and CEQ 2004–2009 respectively, giving an overall average BA/NI of 0.61 for the subcategory. The overall average BA/NI identified the level of student satisfaction under each category. A category with a high average 'BA/NI' implied a high level of student satisfaction.

The ratio measuring all BA and NI comments made under a category divided by the total number of BA and NI comments made in all surveys provides a measure of importance. For example, a category with a high '(BA+NI)/all sample comments' implied a high level of importance to students (Scott, 2006).

Results

Based on the ratios calculated, Figure 1 places each of the subcategories into one of four quadrants that represent their level of importance and student satisfaction.

Each of the quadrant lines have been drawn by selecting the median when each of the importance rankings and average BA/NI ratios were ranked in ascending order. For example, within the BA/NI values, community is ranked six out of 12 with a value of 0.86, followed by facilities with a value of 1.91. Therefore, the quadrant line has been drawn at the midpoint between these values at approximately 1.4.

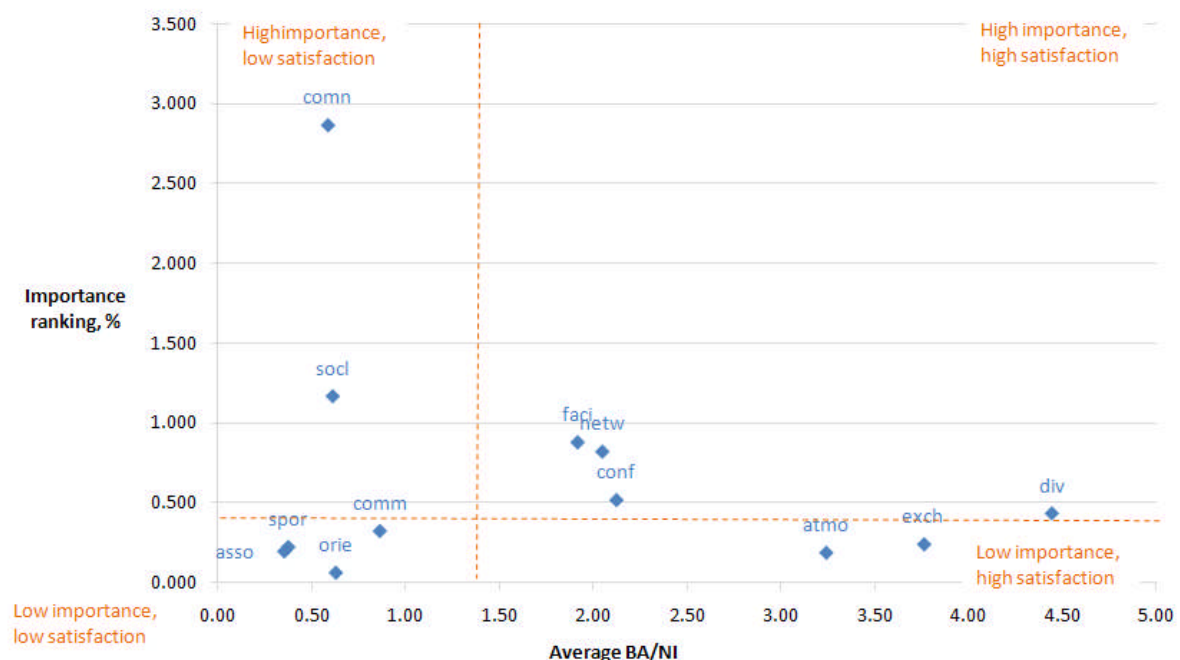


Figure 1

Importance ranks versus satisfaction ratios.

Discussion

It can be seen from Figure 1 that communication, social, facilities, networking, confidence and diversity are subcategories that have been identified as being of high importance to students. Furthermore, clubs and associations, sports, orientation, community, atmosphere and exchange have been identified to be of low importance to students.

Among those of high importance to students, the analysis has found that students show a sense of satisfaction with the facilities, networking opportunities, confidence building and diversity offered to them by the university. However, they are less satisfied with the opportunities provided by the university to communicate and socialise.

Similarly, among the categories identified as being of low importance to students, they seem satisfied with the atmosphere within the university, as well as the exchange programs offered to them. However, the presence of clubs and associations, sports and orientation activities and a sense of campus community could be improved by the university.

When understanding the points made in the discussion, it should be noted that the extraction of student comments was subject to the authors' interpretation, are not mutually exclusive and may contain details of students' academic and non-academic experiences.

Study 2: Student Comments About Their Experience of Studying Abroad

Background

On completion of their study abroad experience, University of South Australia students are asked to complete a questionnaire about their experience. The comments are made available to other students to inform them when selecting their host country and institution. They are also used by staff of the University of South Australia to evaluate the host institution. Each year, the response rate to this survey is very high as students are strongly encouraged to complete it in order to receive credit for their study at the host institution.

Based on their comments, students appear to not only enjoy their experience of studying at another institution in another country, but they benefit personally and professionally from the experience. As a result, students are more than happy to share their experience with others by completing this survey and the comments provide an extremely useful insight into the value of the student experience. The nature of the experience means that students provided a lot of comments about the non-academic experience. Because they were living in a different country where they knew few, if any people, they were forced to adapt to their surroundings and to make new friends and this was facilitated by their non-academic experiences.

Methods

A total of 136 questionnaires were analysed from both undergraduate and postgraduate students. Analysis in this section is based on the answers to six questions:

- Do you think that going on exchange contributed to your academic development, if so how?
- How would you describe the way of life in your exchange destination?
- What is the best way to meet people?
- Do you have any suggestions for what to do on weekends?
- Briefly describe the highlights of your exchange experience
- Any other comments.

CEQuery was used to analyse the comments, and the custom dictionary was modified to better suit the questions asked. Comments were extracted based on those that demonstrated personal development, an ability to connect with people and the corresponding enablers.

The comments were grouped under a series of subthemes that helped identify how students developed personally from the experience, how they connected with others and the enablers that allowed this to occur. A number of keywords stood out, and these were verified

using the online tool Tag Crowd to create individual word clouds for each question to highlight the importance of these words in the overall comments to each question.

Results

The CEQuery analysis highlighted that students benefit personally from the non-academic experience on campus because they become more confident in themselves; for example, some said they are more confident to express their own ideas, it also helped them realise their independence and improved their social and communication skills, which helped them meet new people and make friends.

Comments around meeting and interacting with people were common in all questions analysed, highlighting the importance of the *'people'* aspect of the non-academic experience. Students benefit from the opportunity to meet new people and to make new friends. Students forged connections with others through their similarities and differences and the opportunity to learn about different cultures from others.

Students highlighted enablers in their development of personal skills and connections with others. In particular:

- A significant number of comments highlighted that living on campus provided a very different experience of university and was a strong enabler for making friends and interacting with people. The different experience came from being outside of one's comfort zone such that the student had to work hard to adjust to a new way of life. It also involved broadening perspectives on life and developing the students' international perspectives.
- Comments did not suggest that a physical facility on campus (e.g. bar or gym) facilitated interactions between people, rather being part of a sporting team or attending an event held by a club or society was a strong enabler.
- A number of comments referred to events organised by clubs/societies/associations, highlighting the benefit of these groups having a presence on campus, and the fact that they could be a driver for creating a social atmosphere.
- The social events on campus were important, but the providers varied from clubs and societies to students themselves or the international office for example.
- All of these findings are visible in the word clouds. In particular, the word clouds emphasised the importance of:
 - people: this was the number one word mentioned in response to most questions (word clouds 2–5)
 - the different experience: these words stand out in all word clouds
 - friends stand out in word clouds 2–5.



Word cloud 1

Do you think that going on exchange contributed to your academic development? If so how?



Word cloud 2

How would you describe the way of life in your exchange destination?



Word cloud 3

What is the best way to meet people?



Word cloud 4

Do you have any suggestions for what to do on weekends?



Word cloud 5

Briefly describe the highlights of your exchange experience.

Discussion

Throughout the comments were numerous references to social activities that enabled students to develop personally and to connect with others. Being in a different environment where there was a lot of unfamiliarity empowered the students to realise their potential and step outside their comfort zone. The social activities ranged from parties, to events organised on campus, to being part of a club or society. The comments highlight that a social atmosphere on campus can foster interactions between people. The lack of comments that referred to physical spaces on campus where there was an ongoing social atmosphere, such as a bar or gym, suggest that permanent spaces are not necessarily needed to create this social atmosphere.

Section 4: Discussion

Comments provided by students in the AUSSE and CEQ show that the non-academic experience of students is multifaceted. There are several components that make up this experience, some more important than others. Among the various components, students have identified communication, the social aspects, facilities, networking, building confidence and diversity as being very important for their experience. In addition to the level of importance, students also feel varying degrees of satisfaction on how the different components have met their expectations. Students seem very satisfied with the university's facilities, opportunities to network and build confidence, and interact with a diverse student body. However, they are less satisfied with the communication of events and opportunities to socialise during their university experience.

Understanding the components that make up the student experience, their importance to students, as well as students' levels of satisfaction in having those components met can be of significant importance to education institutions. Components considered to be of high importance, yet providing only low levels of satisfaction to students, can be improved upon.

Institutional resources can be moved from those of less importance to students to components that are important to them.

Study 2 highlighted how students benefited personally from their study abroad experience as well as how they connected with others. It also identified the enablers that allowed this to occur. Throughout the comments were numerous references to social activities that enabled students to develop personally and to connect with others, highlighting that a social atmosphere on campus is important for giving students opportunities to interact with others. A social atmosphere was mentioned in the context of parties and other events organised on campus and being part of a club or society. The importance of clubs and societies having a presence on campus was particularly evident.

Interestingly, there was a lack of comments that referred to physical spaces on campus where there was an ongoing social atmosphere such as a bar or gym, suggesting that permanent spaces are not necessarily needed to create a social atmosphere on campus.

Students indicated a sense of empowerment from being in a ‘different’ environment where they were forced to step outside of their comfort zone to make new friends, adapt to a different culture and a new way of life. From this, students highlighted how they developed personally, for example they became more confident, improved their communication and networking skills and realised their full potential.

The comments from students who studied abroad highlight how ‘different’ experiences, opportunities to meet new people and the presences of clubs and societies are valuable aspects of the non-academic experience. Students did not consider permanent physical spaces on campus where students can socialise to be integral to the non-academic experience.

Taken together, the comments made by students in both studies highlight the aspects of the non-academic experience that are important to them. While the non-academic experience has been the focus of this article, it is important to note that both the academic and non-academic experiences should complement, rather than compete with the other. This was evident when the comments from the surveys were extracted, as they were not mutually exclusive from one another in the different categories. While the comments were subject to the authors’ interpretation to identify comments that related to the non-academic experience, many comments related to both the students’ academic as well as non-academic experience. This highlights the fact that the academic and non-academic experiences of students are interdependent.

While it was not the purpose of this article to recommend strategies for institutions, it presents some interesting insights that institutions may want to consider in relation to the non-academic experience. In particular, institutions may consider:

- conducting their own analysis on student comments with a view to identify the institution’s unique components of the non-academic experience
- consider using these aspects as differentiators in an increasingly competitive market
- fostering increased opportunities for non-academic student experience by working closely with students.

Section 4: Conclusion

As universities work towards meeting the government's targets by widening participation, they must refocus their attention on, and rethink the student experience. In addition, it is important to be aware of the valuable contribution the student experience can make to ensuring students complete their studies. This article has highlighted how the non-academic student experience can add value to students' overall experience at university and contribute to their personal development.

Universities have a critical role in ensuring their graduates can cope with the changing expectations of government, industry, business and community. The non-academic experience can play an important part in enhancing and building the skills that students need to ensure their full participation in society.

References

- Asmar, C. (2005). Internationalising students: Reassessing diasporic and local student differences. *Students in Higher Education*, 30(3), 290–309.
- Australian Council for Educational Research. (2009). *Doing more for learning: Enhancing engagement and outcomes. Australian survey of student engagement. Australian student engagement report*. Victoria, Australia: Australian Council for Educational Research.
- Benckendorff, P., Ruhanen, L., & Scott, N. (2009). Deconstructing the student experience: A conceptual framework. *Journal of Hospitality and Tourism Management*, 16, 84–93.
- Bradley, D., Noonan, P., Nugent, H., & Scales, B. (2008). *Review of Australian Higher Education. Final Report*. Australia. Retrieved September 1, 2010, from <http://www.deewr.gov.au/highereducation/review/pages/reviewofaustralianhighereducationreport.aspx>
- CEQuery qualitative analysis for the Australian tertiary sector. (2005). Retrieved September 30, 2010, from <http://www.cequery.com/>
- Devlin, M. (2010, September 29). Improved access needs on-campus support. *The Australian*, p. 29.
- Foubert, J.D., & Grainger, L.U. (2006). Effects of involvement in clubs and organizations on the psychological development of first-year and senior college students. *NASPA Journal*, 43(1), 166–182.
- Gillard, J. (2009). *Speech. Universities Australia Conference – 4 March 2009*. Retrieved 30 September, 2010, from http://www.deewr.gov.au/Ministers/Gillard/Media/Speeches/Pages/Article_090304_155721.aspx
- Gloria, A.M., Castellanos, J., Lopez, A.G., & Rosales, R. (2005). An examination of academic non-persistence decisions of Latino undergraduates. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioural Sciences*, 27(2), 202–223.
- Graduate Careers Australia. (2008). *University and Beyond 2008: Snapshot Report*. Australia: Author. Retrieved September 27, 2010, from <http://www.graduatecareers.com.au/ucm/groups/content/documents/document/gca001229.pdf>

- Graduate Careers Australia. (2010.). *Australian Graduate Survey*. Retrieved September 30, 2010, from <http://www.graduatecareers.com.au/Research/Surveys/AustralianGraduateSurvey/index.htm>
- Horstmanshof, L., & Zimitat, C. (2007). Future time orientation predicts academic engagement among first-year university students. *British Journal of Educational Psychology*, 77, 703–718.
- Madge, C., Meek, J., Wellens, J., & Hooley, T. (2009). Facebook, social integration and informal learning at university: ‘It is more for socialising and talking to friends about work than for actually doing work. *Learning, Media and Technology*, 34(2), 141–155.
- Moeck, P.G., Hardy, D.E., & Katsinas, S.G. (2007). Residential living at Rural Community Colleges. *New Directions for Community Colleges*, 137, 77–86.
- Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development. (2009). *Education at a Glance 2009. OECD Indicators*. Author. Retrieved September 27, 2010, from http://www.oecd.org/document/24/0,3746,en_2649_39263238_43586328_1_1_1_1,0.html
- Rosenthal, D.A., Russel, J., & Thompson, G. (2007). Social connectedness among international students at an Australian university. *Social Indicators Research*, 84, 71–82.
- Scott, G. (2006). Using CEQuery to identify what retains students and promotes engagement in productive learning in Australian higher education, University of Western Sydney. Retrieved September 30, 2010, from http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/higher_education/publications_resources/profiles/documents/accessing_pdf.htm
- Walker, N. (2009). *UniSA Employer Feedback Survey External Report*. Retrieved 30 September 2010, from <http://www.unisa.edu.au/gradquals/EmployerReport.pdf>
- Wilcox, P., Winn, S., & Fyvie-Gauld, M. (2005). ‘It was nothing to do with the university, it was just the people’: The role of social support in the first-year experience of higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 30(6), 707–722.
- Zepke, N., & Leach, L. (2005). Integration and Adaptation: Approaches to the student retention and achievement puzzle. *Active Learning in Higher Education*, 6(1), 46–59.